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A Response to John Sommerville's *The Decline of the Secular University*

William Vance Trollinger, Jr.

Conference on Faith and History: Plenary Session

Washington, DC

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It is more than a little daunting to bring up the rear on a panel like this, and I am afraid - as I feared would be the case- my colleagues have set the bar a bit too high. But I can say - and I would think this is a good thing for those of you in the audience - that this morning we have four distinct responses to Prof. Sommerville's interesting and provocative book.

I want to start and end my comments today with two shamefully personal and upbeat observations. For my opening upbeat observation: In his introduction Rick Kennedy mentioned that I am director of the University of Dayton's graduate program in the Religious Studies Department. Well, I am also in UD's History Department, as Associate Professor of History - and in that role I am spending most of my time interviewing candidates for our department's opening in Ancient History. These are folks trained at our very best secular universities - the sort of school under the microscope here today. But these candidates are proving themselves remarkably adept at taking religion seriously, at allowing religious voices to be heard, at incorporating the notion of cultural encounters into their work, at appropriately complexifying our understanding of Western civilization, at making historical judgments. If I had to go by these interviews alone, I would say our secular universities are doing a fine job indeed.

This said, I want to start my formal remarks by noting that I agree with Prof. Sommerville that in too many places the secular university has trivialized religion and religious commitment, and that it is high time for religion to be welcomed into our academic debates. I say this even while I take issue with some of the particulars in Prof. Sommerville's book. I will give two examples related to our discipline of history. First, Prof. Sommerville decries that "secularist humanities have declared war on metanarratives because of their hegemonic power." But I confess that I am very pleased to see the demise of metanarratives in our

discipline of history, not only because such metanarratives are hegemonic (of course they are), but also because they are false and distortive, and do not mesh with our understanding of ourselves as sinful human beings with only partial understanding. Second, while I agree with Prof. Sommerville that there are problems with moving willy-nilly from Western civilization courses to courses in “world history” - precisely because it has proven to be very difficult to construct meaningful historical narratives that actually encompass the globe -- I also think that the folks who have pushed us to think about much more carefully about global connections and global encounters and the world beyond Europe have done all of us a great favor by making clear that the notion of “Western civilization” is, in the end, a very problematic construct that has never been neutral in its content.

But my comments are not primarily designed to examine particular aspects of Prof. Sommerville’s very interesting argument. Instead, I want to go a different path, directing my comments more directly to this particular audience. And in this regard I have to confess that it seems a little odd to me that we are discussing John Sommerville’s *Decline of the Secular University* here at the annual January meeting of the Conference of Faith and History. Oh, it is not that Prof. Sommerville’s book is not worthy of our analysis and discussion and argument - of course it is. And of course what he has to argue here does impinge on how we conduct ourselves within our discipline. Still, and as is obvious from the title, this is a book primarily concerned with the state of the secular university in the United States. And while many of us in this room earned our doctorates from such institutions, the vast majority of members of the Conference on Faith and History - Profs. Sommerville and Frykenberg notwithstanding -- do not actually teach at such institutions. Instead, most of us teach at religiously affiliated colleges and universities. And while there are a few outliers like myself who teach at a Catholic university, the much greater number of us teach at (or, in the case of Prof. Mullen, preside over) schools that fit somewhere under the umbrella of Protestant evangelical and denominational colleges.

Over the past half-century or so many of these schools have understood and portrayed themselves to be faith-based alternatives to the secular universities described by Prof.

Sommerville. More than this, they have **marketed** themselves as faith-based alternatives, in the process seeking to attract students from families nervous about sending their sons and daughters to schools infested by radical secularism. In this regard, an ingenious marketing person could use quotes from Prof. Sommerville's book as part of an ad campaign: for example, if you do not want to send your son or daughter to a huge, bureaucratic state university that seeks to "censor" and "stifle" religious views, and that insinuates a "moral equivalency" among religions and civilizations, then our Christian college is just the place for you.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the *Decline of the Secular University* would seem to confirm the necessity, the virtue, of the institutions at which most of us teach. (One could even see this book as confirming the necessity, the virtue, of the Conference on Faith and History). And perhaps this sort of affirmation is reason enough for us to spend our annual January meeting focused on Prof. Sommerville's interesting book.

But to say this begs a very important question: What is **actually** happening at our religiously-affiliated colleges and universities? I don't mean what is said in the institutional mission statements. I don't mean what is being said by administrators, even wise and thoughtful Christian college presidents such as my friend Shirley Mullen. Such statements matter, yes, but they don't tell us what is actually happening in our schools. Or, I should say, they don't tell us very much about what is actually happening - inside and outside of the classroom, with our students -- at religiously-affiliated colleges and universities.

In this regard, it seems to me that there would be great merit for the Conference on Faith and History to turn its attention inward, as it were, and to ask a deceptively simple question: Is the idea of a Christian college or university a good idea, and how is the idea working out in practice? What would it mean to turn our critical gaze from the state universities and to the institutions in which most of us teach or will teach? If *The Decline of the Secular University* is the title of Prof. Sommerville's book, what would be the title of a book discussing what is happening at religiously-affiliated schools in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America?

I won't claim to have an answer to these questions. But I have two comments, one which is structural and pessimistic, the other which is specific and hopeful. First, structural

and pessimistic. One thing that I thought was missing, or not developed, in *The Decline of the Secular University* was a discussion of the corrosive effects of capitalism. There is occasional reference to market forces, but not nearly enough on the ways in which such forces - combined with state legislatures -- pressure universities to prepare students who will be ready to take their places in the business and professional world. As Karl Marx told us (and this is one of the rare moments at a CFH meeting that a speaker quotes Marx!), in the face of capitalism “all that is solid melts into air” - and I would argue that this certainly applies to traditional conceptions of the humanities and the liberal arts.

Of course, religiously affiliated colleges and universities are not immune to the pressures of capitalism. In fact, given that many such schools are small and under-resourced, I would argue that they are particularly susceptible to such forces. Survival requires that many such schools must move from a focus on the liberal arts and toward the development of professional programs that will attract students. Connected with this is the rapid development of off-site degree completion and Master’s programs in such areas as business administration, leadership development, teacher education, and so forth. These programs are designed to make a profit - as one administrator said to me, they are “low hanging fruit” -- that will allow the rest of the college or university (the liberal arts part of the institution) to stay afloat. Now, it is certainly conceivable that such programs could be fully informed by the college’s mission to provide an education shaped by the institution’s set of particular religious commitments. But this seems very unlikely, given that such programs are understood as “for-profit” enterprises, given that they are often primarily staffed by adjuncts (who are much cheaper to employ), and given that - when they are off-site - they are notoriously difficult to monitor and assess. At the very least, any analysis of what is actually happening at our religiously-affiliated colleges and universities must take into account the proliferation of these programs, must take seriously the corrosive effects of capitalism.

But I want to conclude with, again, comments that are shamefully personal and upbeat. As noted before, I am the director of the graduate programs in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton. We have master’s programs in pastoral ministry

and theological studies, and we also offer a Ph.D. in Theology. This latter program is relatively new -- it was started in 1999 - but it has taken off, both in number (we currently have 28 doctoral students) and quality of students. It is a program that is strongly interdisciplinary - drawing upon faculty in American Studies, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology. And while it has an explicit focus on the U.S. Catholic Experience - that is to say, it is a theology program that understands theology to be “sited” - it has attracted a good number of Protestant (primarily evangelical) students, from places like Baylor and Duke and Cincinnati Bible College.

In talking with our PhD students about what attracted them to the program and what keeps them in the program I have been struck by their observation that they appreciate the combination of intellectual rigor and the fact that most of their professors, their mentors, have deep religious commitments. “Theology in the service of the church”: that is how we describe what we are doing, and this is what seems to resonate with our students. Now, all of this is an extraordinarily precarious enterprise, dependent on good hires and adequate resources and constant, critical self-evaluation, to see if we are doing what we say we are doing. Still, despite my predilection for bleak analysis, I find hope, both in many of the recent trends in historical scholarship, and in the possibilities that remain in a religiously-informed vision of higher education.